

## Call and Answer: Poems and Pictorial Responses

by Madeleine Mysko

As I rode the crowded train to New York, I turned the pages of the book on my lap—*Call and Answer: Poems by Joyce Brown, Illustrated by Mary Swann* (BrickHouse Books, 2005). The woman seated beside me was looking over my shoulder. Did she think I had purchased a gift for a grandchild?

The format of *Call and Answer* does indeed call to mind a children's book: broad pages, colorful illustrations, poems set in big type. But what about the picture of the wide-eyed face of a girl (*woman?*) turning into the light from out of black and purple shadow, not to mention the poem on the facing page, "For Better or for Worse"? Surely the woman on the train could see that *Call and Answer* is not a children's book, not with these "Small/ yellow pills" working on the speaker's brain:

. . . fears  
of fatal illnesses,  
fluorescent lights,  
family snares—  
gone—along with  
my libido,  
and its dangerous blue eyes.

When I was very young, the poems in my books were illustrated. I loved the pictures as much as I loved the poems read to me. But now I read poems that stand alone on the white page, beautiful language providing its own light—it's own vision. The adult reader of poetry does not *need* illustrations. Having stated the obvious, I find it intriguing to move to questions provoked by *Call and Answer*: What happens when the illustration appears anyway, and what do we get when the poet collaborates with the painter?

It's important to understand the creative process that resulted in this collaboration between Joyce Brown and Mary Swann. In her "Artist's Note," Swann explains that she chose, from the body of Brown's finished poems, the ones that presented themselves to her "in pictures":

As it turns out, many of them are little dramas. It seems natural that a painter of scenes would feel most competent responding to these.

The illustrations are not meant to demonstrate or explain the action taking place in the poems, but rather to provide a pictorial response to what is being expressed.

Thus, the title of the collaboration—*Call and Answer*—is apt: The poet's little drama calls to the artist; the artist answers in the swift strokes of monoprint. On the other hand, the subtitle (*Poems by . . . Illustrated by . . .*) is slightly misleading. While "illustrated by" does accurately describe the chronology of the process—first the poem and then the picture—it doesn't do justice to the bold enterprise of these two artists. Swann's own term—"pictorial response"—hits closer to the mark, because *Call and Answer* is something other than a chapbook of poems that happen to be illustrated here (and might just as well have stood without illustration elsewhere.)

Open to any page of *Call and Answer* and you will see that it isn't really a question of what demands your attention first, poem or picture. It's a question of what one gets when poem calls and picture *calls back*. The evidence here is that one gets a book of poems deeply affected by their pictorial responses.

In her "Poet's Note," Brown writes that each of Swann's responses delights her "with its angle into the poem," and with "the color, in every sense of that word," it brings. It is useful to ask how the angle and color of a monoprint affect a poem successful in its own right, a poem such as "Cat Girl," for example. The tight stanzas of "Cat Girl" delight a reader with their four clean leaps, from a cat bravely patting the "little pond" in the toilet bowl, backwards to two moments in childhood—first the speaker watching as a boy tosses his "terrified cat" from a boat, as the cat crawls back up the boy's arm, and then the speaker shocked by the cold lake water of summer, her "red wool/ tank suit sodden as fur"—and finally a stanza that lands in the present:

Mornings, when cold water  
hits my face, I want to claw  
my way up the bare arm  
of day, crouch back down  
into the old dry boat of night.

The illustration fills the facing page. A sodden black cat, rendered in the spontaneous "scratches" of monoprint, claws up the arm of a child leaning from a boat. The prominent color is the cheerful (dangerous?) blue of the water. In the distance is a row of trees against a golden sky. The child's expression can be read as neither cruel nor kind, but the child's extended arm—a very long arm, up which the cat crawls from the water—seems benevolent. It is the cat's small face, squinting and up-turned, that takes

hold at the very center of this scene. Such simple, quick strokes—Is it accidental that the boat is angled upward, the prow against that golden sky?

I am uncomfortable describing Swann’s illustrations, because I know practically nothing about the challenges of printmaking. My appreciation for Swann’s pictorial response rises from my experience in the making and reading of poems. I believe that Swann’s pictorial response truly does eschew explanation of the action in the *surface* narrative of “Cat Girl.” She has managed rather, by way of image and color, to reach the narrative deep in this poem, the narrative continued further in other poems. In more than one delightful way, “Cat Girl” is linked to “For Better or for Worse”: Think “yellow pills” and see again the yellow sky, the cat and also the speaker clawing upward. Arrive finally at “Rowing”—the last poem in the book, small and curled in on itself, not unlike the cat in the picture, curled in the prow:

I row in my little boat  
on the sea which takes me  
where it will—and still  
I row.

On the surface, Brown’s poems, at least those selected by the artist here, are straightforwardly narrative. Their slightness and simplicity play wittily—precariously—against the dark. It is deliciously ironic then that Swann’s monoprints are so colorful and active, the human figure in postures boldly and exuberantly expressive, the animal figures—birds, cats, horses, a big gerbil, dwarf bears, mice, an insect reminiscent of Kafka—boldly whipping up metaphoric links. Thus the illustrations also play against the dark. For “Apple Pie,” in which the speaker kills a mouse with doorstep, the pictorial

response is a monster of a doorstep and a tiny human figure in dead-mouse pose, the apparent aftermath of the “THUD” the speaker awaits.

If this slim collection stood alone, without pictorial response, one might find the work uneven, for not every poem here seems crafted with the same seriousness. I suspect the inclusion of certain poems is owing to the appeal of “little dramas” to artist. This is the risk a poet takes when she collaborates with a painter of scenes. Brown has had to trust that Swann will perform her part in the act ably.

The cover art for *Call and Answer* captures this complicated relationship between poem and pictorial response. The detail is taken not from the title poem, but from “Pageant”: a clown in bright parti-colored costume stands boldly astride a horse, the blur of outstretched arms suggesting perhaps the attempt at balance. It is fitting cover art for the serious balancing act this poet and this artist are so bold to attempt, as though it were a day at the circus, child’s play.